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‘German Ecocriticism: An Overview’¹

Axel Goodbody

(for *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard)

The contrast between the largely enthusiastic response to ecocriticism in the Anglophone academy and its relative invisibility in the German-speaking world is a puzzle. Why has it yet to gain wider recognition as a field of literary study in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, countries in whose philosophy and cultural tradition nature features so prominently, whose people are shown by international surveys of public opinion to show a high degree of environmental concern, and where environmental issues rank consistently high on the political agenda? One reason may be that German scientists, political thinkers and philosophers have been pioneers in ecology since Humboldt and Haeckel, and non-fiction books have served as the primary medium of public debate on environmental issues in Germany. There has been a wealth of twentieth-century ecological thinking rooted in phenomenology (from Heidegger to the Böhmes), classical humanism (from Fromm to Jonas and Meyer-Abich) and social theory (from the Frankfurt School to Beck). But German literary writing has had a more limited impact on environmental discourse and public attitudes, at home as well as abroad.

Although most major writers over the last forty years (including Christa Wolf, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and the three recent Nobel prizewinners Günter Grass, Herta Müller and Elfriede Jelinek) have treated environmental issues at some point in their work, relatively few important novels (or films) have foregrounded environmental issues in Germany since a brief period in the early to mid 1980s. The one German writer whose thinking on the environment enjoys global recognition is in fact Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who wrote during the Romantic period.² Even the ‘Culture and Climate’ project launched by the Goethe Institute in 2009 as a special thematic focus of their

¹ My thanks go to Gabriele Dürbeck, Agnes Kneitz, Bernhard Malkmus, Ute Seiderer, Berbeli Wanning and Evi Zemanek, who commented on a draft of this essay. Without their help it would have been considerably less well informed.

² See for instance Seamon/ Zajonc 1998, which brings together essays on the “ecological” views in Goethe’s science, and its contemporary use (see especially Nigel Hoffmann’s essay, ‘The Unity of Science and Art: Goethean Phenomenology as a New Ecological Discipline’, pp. 129-176). Peter Smith’s work is also relevant in this context (e.g. Smith 2000).

work in representing German cultural interests abroad is mainly concerned with artists, photographers, film makers and performance artists, rather than with writers. Nature and environment have certainly been prominent concerns in twentieth-century German art (from the artists of the Worpswede colony and Expressionism in the early 1900s to Joseph Beuys and Friedensreich Hundertwasser), and arguably also in film (if one considers German mountain films, the Heimat film, Werner Herzog's oeuvre, and the many nature documentaries and regional landscape films shown on TV in recent years).³ However, it remains a notable fact that artists and film makers are currently considered so much better able than German writers to assist the public in reflecting on the human causes of climate change and imagining its consequences.

A second reason for the reluctance of literary scholars in Germany to engage in environmentally-focused criticism has been the legacy of suspicion regarding 'irrational' feeling for nature after 1945. Into the 1980s and beyond it was common for these to seek to distance themselves from the *völkisch* (i.e. racist-nationalist) thinking which emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and culminated in the Nazis' cult of blood and soil, and to distrust the links between nature and national identity which are often encountered elsewhere. The racially inflected ideological loading of German thinking on nature which was fed by prominent literary historians and critics in the 1930s appeared to some to be echoed in core thematic concerns of ecocritics such as nature conservation and place belonging. When the environmental movement emerged in Germany in the early 1970s, about a decade later than in the USA, its blend of (sometimes oversimplified) rational arguments with emotionally charged opposition to materialist values and what were perceived as high-risk technologies, and its apocalyptic rhetoric seemed to sceptical academics a potentially dangerous throwback to Romantic and turn-of-the-century forms of anti-modernism.

Environmental history has, however, flourished in Germany since the 1980s. Scholars in both Europe and America have subjected shifting attitudes

³ Studies of German environmental and landscape art include Finlay 1997 and Jael Lehmann 2012. Relevant work on German film includes studies of the mountain film (Rentschler 1990), the rural Heimat film (Palfreyman 2002, von Moltke 2005), and the films of Werner Herzog (Gandy 1996).

towards nature and conceptions of appropriate management of the environment in the German-speaking countries to extensive critical analysis.⁴ More specialised studies have tended to focus on either the Heimat (homeland) and back-to-nature youth movements at the turn of the twentieth century,⁵ the Third Reich,⁶ or the environmental movement.⁷ Environmental history has emerged as a field embracing elements of the history of ideas and cultural history alongside political and social history, and cultural geography. In some instances, literary history has been subsumed into historical accounts of German culture and society: literary and artistic representations have been drawn on in a series of monographs and collections of essays.⁸ At the same time, important work has been conducted by German philosophers, reviewing shifting understandings of nature,⁹ and exploring environmental ethics¹⁰ and aesthetics.¹¹ Linguists, media studies specialists, psychologists, sociologists, ethnologists and political theorists have all produced further work of relevance to ecocritics. It is not, however, possible to do justice to the contribution of these disciplines to the ecocritical cause within the scope of this article.¹²

The contrast is striking between this wealth of ecocritical work in the broader sense and the relatively few scholars of German literature who have, as already indicated, chosen to address environmental themes directly. (Fewer still have labelled their work 'ecocritical'). A high proportion are, moreover, *Auslandsgermanisten*, or scholars working abroad (e.g. Jost Hermand, Bernhard Malkmus, Heather Sullivan and Sabine Wilke in the USA, Kate Rigby in Australia, Axel Goodbody and Colin Riordan in the UK, Serenella Iovino in Italy, and Nevzat Kaya in Turkey). Germans who have

⁴ E.g. Lekan 2004, Mauch 2004, Blackbourn 2006.

⁵ Rollins 1997.

⁶ Biehl/ Staudenmaier 1995, Brüggemeier/ Cioc/ Zeller 2005.

⁷ Dominick 1992, Radkau 2011.

⁸ Sieferle 1984, Groh/ Groh 1991 and 1996, Kirchhoff/ Trepl 2009.

⁹ Rapp 1981, Gernot Böhme 1992, Lothar Schäfer 1993, Wilke 1993.

¹⁰ Krebs 1999.

¹¹ Gernot Böhme 1989, Vietta 1995, Seel 1997.

¹² The institutional context is a factor in literary ecocriticism's emergence in Germany as a branch of cultural studies, rather than as an autonomous field of literary enquiry, and its strong links with other humanities disciplines. The Rachel Carson Centre in Munich is a key site of interdisciplinary ecocritical study today. Founded in 2009 as a joint initiative of the University of Munich and the Deutsches Museum (Germany's national museum of technology), the RCC is concerned with all aspects of interaction between human agents and nature. Seeking to strengthen the role of the humanities in current political and scientific debates about the environment, it is led by historians, but includes among its affiliates scholars of literature and film such as Sylvia Mayer, Agnes Kneitz, and Alexa Weik.

made significant contributions to ecocritical studies such as Hannes Bergthaller, Catrin Gersdorf, Christa Grewe-Volpp, Sylvia Mayer and Hubert Zapf have generally been working on American or British literature, and the first ecocritical conference in Germany, at which ASLE's European affiliate (European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment) was founded, was hosted by the English Department of the University of Münster in 2004.

English – more precisely American – studies have then led the way in introducing literary ecocriticism in Germany. (The discipline had earlier performed a similar role with postcolonialism.) However, this should be understood as a reflection of the sedimentation of national historical experience in cultural difference, rather than indicating that mainstream literature departments in Germany have nothing to contribute to environmentally-oriented literary scholarship. The cultural difference is present on several levels. First, there are the differences between the linguistic repertoires and the resonances which individual terms possess. Then there are discrepancies between the relative importance of literary writing on particular themes and in particular genres: for instance, depictions of wilderness are less common than those of 'cultural landscape', and nature writing plays a much less significant role in German than in American cultural tradition. Indeed, it is not recognised as a genre. Last but not least, there are asymmetries in academic discourse and its philosophical underpinning, in the constellation of schools of thought and rival theoretical approaches, and in the emergence of concepts, categorisations, research questions and approaches. All these factors have led to the pursuit of different trends in cultural theory.

However, the fact that Ansgar Nünning's influential *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie* has contained an entry on 'Ecocriticism' since its second edition (Heise 2001) may be seen as an indication that the approach is no longer entirely unknown to German students of literary theory. Indeed, German ecocriticism has slowly begun to gain international recognition. German contributions to nature philosophy, ecological thinking and the study of the investment of nature with symbolic meaning in popular culture have been widely acknowledged abroad (see Worster 1977, Harrison 1992, Schama 1995), and Timothy Clark's recent introduction to literature and the

environment (Clark 2011) discusses (for the first time in an English book of its kind) a work of German environmental writing, and cites German ecocritics. As well as presenting Wilhelm Raabe's novella *Pfister's Mill* (1884) as a pioneering work of ecojustice (pp. 96-8), Clark examines Heidegger's critique of modern technology (pp. 55-60), Gernot Böhme's aesthetics (pp. 81-2) and Hubert Zapf's theory of literature as cultural ecology (pp. 153-5).

Without conceiving of themselves as ecocritics, German literary scholars have long explored the rich field of German literary, artistic and cultural representations of our relationship with the natural environment, asked what contribution novelists, essayists, dramatists and poets, film directors and artists have made to reconceiving it and imagining alternatives, and analysed their modes of production and adaptation of cultural tradition. This work includes articles and books which appeared already in the 1960s and 1970s on Baroque idylls (Garber 1974), physico-theology and its reflection in 18th-century nature poetry (Ketelsen 1974), Goethe's conception of nature (Zimmermann 1969), Romantic nature imagery (von Bormann 1968), and modern nature poetry (Hans Dieter Schäfer 1969). Then in the late 1970s the first anthologies of environmental literature appeared, and with them pioneering articles approaching texts in the literary canon from a position of environmentalist concern: Leo Kreutzer called for a new reading of Goethe's nature poems (1978), and Horst Denkler drew attention to Raabe's aforementioned *Pfister's Mill* as an early example of reflection on the social and cultural consequences of industrial pollution (Denkler 1980). From the early eighties onwards a range of studies followed, such as Herles's account of the human/ nature relationship in novels since 1945 (1982), Haupt's study of twentieth-century German nature poetry (1982), and Knabe's (1985) and Mallinckrodt's (1987) article and book on representations of the impact of industrialisation in East German novels.¹³

A list of genuinely ecocritical titles, in the stricter sense of being substantially focussed on either German literature or literary theory and driven by concern for the environment, would be confined to a dozen monographs

¹³ Programmatic statements on the necessity of examining literary representations of the natural environment followed in the late eighties and nineties (Hartmut Böhme 1988 and 1994, Hermand 1997).

and a roughly equal number of edited volumes. The first of these might be seen as Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand's collection of essays on literary representations of nature and naturalness (1981). Hermand followed this with a ground-breaking monograph, *Grüne Utopien in Deutschland* (1991), a paperback written for a general readership, which reviewed Green thinking in Germany since Rousseau from an eco-socialist standpoint. Discussing canonical fiction and poetry, and many forgotten authors, alongside essays and political manifestos, Hermand revealed the richness of the intellectual tradition on which contemporary writers associated with the environmental movement could draw.

The first scholar working in Germany to publish a book-length study of ecocriticism, this time from the perspective of literary tradition rather than the history of ideas, was Gerhard Kaiser. Kaiser's *Mutter Natur und die Dampfmaschine* (1991) examined the idealisation of nature which accompanied the growing scientific objectivisation and technological domination of the natural world as a complementary phenomenon in the early nineteenth century, and argued that literary texts (by Goethe, Keller and Raabe) played a key role in promoting the influential figure of 'mother nature'. The first significant publication in English was a collection of essays *Green Thought in German Culture*, edited by Colin Riordan in 1997, which resulted from a conference of British Germanists in Swansea. This volume combined a historical overview with contributions on the environmental movement in the early twentieth century, ecological dimensions of critical theory, new age religiosity and right wing politics, and essays on West and East German writing, Swiss literature, and art and film. The literary production of the Bavarian novelist, cultural commentator and Green thinker and activist Carl Amery was the principal focus of a further multi-disciplinary essay volume, *The Culture of German Environmentalism* (Goodbody 2002). This juxtaposed accounts of the history, sociological make-up and theoretical foundations of the environmental movement since the 1970s with contributions on German journalism, literature and film.

The Australian Germanist and Comparativist Kate Rigby had meanwhile presented a masterly comparative account of the German and English Romantics' understanding of humanity's place in the natural world in

Topographies of the Sacred (2004). Rigby showed how Goethe, Novalis, Tieck and Eichendorff registered and reflected on the dual impoverishment of humanity which resulted from the demand we close off our imagination and capacity for empathy with natural others, and from relegation of the corporeal aspect of the self to mechanical nature. Their work is placed in the context of continental Romantic philosophers and their English contemporaries. Building on Jonathan Bate's *Song of the Earth* and informed by post-Heideggerian readings, Rigby confirms the importance of conceptions of dwelling for ecocritical analysis, while introducing significant modifications.¹⁴

2005 and 2006 saw the publication of two significant volumes of papers from the first conference on ecocriticism in Germany. *Natur – Kultur – Text* (Gersdorf/ Mayer 2005) and *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Gersdorf/ Mayer 2006) combined explorations of ecocritical theory with textual analysis. The former contained an introduction to ecocritical theory for German-speaking readers, and essays (in German) on cultural theory, environmental communication and German authors since Kleist. The English language volume opened with an introduction to ecocriticism foregrounding the theory of cultural ecology. The essays which followed are mainly on American literature, but contributions from Riordan, Meacher, Griffiths and Goodbody address German texts.¹⁵ Stefan Hofer's exposition of an ecocritical systems theory, a longer study published in 2007, drew on Niklas Luhmann to provide a theoretical grounding in the social function of literature which was lacking in previous ecocritical scholarship. Luhmann's insistence on the separateness of the political, economic, legal and cultural systems in society, and their relative inability to influence each other, is conceived as a way of avoiding normative arguments and the trap of relying on moral exhortation to solve environmental problems. Bergthaller (2011) has recently presented an English language version of this systems theory approach.

¹⁴ Heather Sullivan is responsible for further innovative ecocritical work on Goethe and the Romantics – see Sullivan 2003 and 2010.

¹⁵ Unpublished doctoral theses by Hope, Meacher and Griffiths, and Andrew Liston's book study of contemporary Swiss writing (2011) are further examples of British Germanist ecocriticism. The Swiss literary tradition, in which Alpine landscapes have served as a focus for reflections on the sublime, the simple life and the detrimental impact of modernisation, has also been the subject of studies including Barkhoff 1997 and Ireton/ Schaumann 2012.

Axel Goodbody's book *Nature, Technology and Cultural Change in 20th-Century German Literature* (2007) opens with an introduction on nature and environment in German culture, and American, British and German ecocritical approaches, followed by a chapter on Goethe's legacy. The book then traces the shifts in attitudes towards the environment over the course of the twentieth century through comparative studies of works on four themes: technological disasters, dwelling, hunting, and the city. A more recent collection, *Ökologische Transformationen und literarische Repräsentationen* (Ermisch 2010) contains essays originating in a symposium held by German literature specialists (with the support of environmental historians) at the University of Göttingen. It may be seen as marking the final acceptance of ecocriticism in mainstream German literary studies.¹⁶ The volume brings together closely argued contributions on classical, early modern, and contemporary authors, and on genres ranging from poetry and nature writing to children's literature and eco-fiction.¹⁷

In Germany as elsewhere, pastoral and apocalypse have served as key modes of cultural production in representations of the environment. The *Heimat* (or homeland) was redefined and local belonging rehabilitated in the 1970s in the context of the environmental movement. Novels and films such as Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* (which has developed into a 53-hour epic since its first series in 1984, tracing life in a rural village from 1919 through to 2000) have reflected this process. Critical studies of *Heimat* and its literary and visual representation¹⁸ have increasingly included reflection on the role played by place-belonging in the motivation to lead a sustainable way of life.¹⁹ Literary topography has emerged as a related focus for German contributions to ecology-oriented research. Representations of landscape as a repository of historical experience (the emphasis being normally on political violence and destruction of the environment) in the work of Wolf and Sebald, and of the

¹⁶ Principal organiser of the symposium was Heinrich Detering, whose longstanding interest in the subtleties of literary reflection of environmental issues is evidenced by Detering 1992 and 2008.

¹⁷ Genres of popular prose writing which have attracted critical attention include the eco-thriller (Wanning 2008), crime novels (Schüller 1997), science fiction (Stapleton 1993), and risk narratives (Heise 2008, Zemanek 2012).

¹⁸ Blickle 1992, Boa/ Palfreyman 2000.

¹⁹ Goodbody 2013.

Austrian writers Bachmann, Bernhard, Handke and Jelinek, have for instance been subjected to critical analysis.²⁰

Studies of literature in the apocalyptic mode since the 1980s have focused increasingly on the representation of environmental catastrophes.²¹ Climate change has led to an upsurge of interest in the topic in the last few years (see Dürbeck 2012 and Mauch/ Mayer 2012). Climate change in German literature is also an area of interest of the 'Climate Culture' group led by Claus Leggewie at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities in Essen, and a strand of the Environmental Humanities Transatlantic Research Network funded by the Humboldt Foundation and led by Sabine Wilke in Seattle.

Representations of and reflections on natural disasters, instances of human destruction and natural processes of decay have been a feature of German writing since the Second World War from Arno Schmidt to W.G. Sebald, and Sebald's richly complex work (especially his long poem *After Nature* and account of a walking tour in Sussex, *The Rings of Saturn*) has served as a nexus of interest for ecocritics, scholars of cultural memory, travel writing, autobiography and Holocaust literature.²² Environmental justice and environmental racism issues have been addressed obliquely in Germany through depictions of the deterritorialisation and dispossession of the Jews, resulting in an ecocritical dimension to some work in the field of Holocaust studies. In Sebald, there is a further link between the two subjects: the narrator's distinctive position on the margins, seeking tactful identification with his Jewish protagonists, is echoed in the way Sebald gives voice to animals and nature as victims of wanton human destruction. In one of the most thought-provoking ecocritically oriented contributions to the body of Sebald scholarship which has grown so rapidly since the author's untimely death in 2001, *On Creaturely Life* (2006), Eric Santner takes up Agamben's redefinition of the theological concept of the 'creature' as a biopolitical category, where the human is reduced to a state of passivity, of being perpetually created, under the traumatic conditions of arbitrary sovereign rule

²⁰ Key studies of German literary topography include Weigel 1996, Hartmut Böhme 2005, and Webber 2008.

²¹ For instance Groh/ Kemper/ Mauleshagen 2003 and Rigby 2008.

²² Publications on nature in Sebald's writing include Fuchs 2007 and Malkmus 2011.

and institutional violence in modernity. Santner reads Sebald's prose as a site for exploration of the realm of creaturely suffering in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

An overview of this kind would not be complete without seeking to give a more general picture of developments in ecocritical theory in Germany, and to identify the German contribution. In the spread of the approach from the Anglophone world to other countries and academic communities over the past decade, German scholars have, like those elsewhere, frequently drawn on locally predominant traditions, diversifying and enriching the ecological approach in the process. German theoretical debates in the nineteen-seventies and eighties were dominated less by postmodernism and poststructuralism than by hermeneutics, drawing on Gadamer, Frankfurt School Neo-Marxist approaches indebted to Adorno and Benjamin, and cultural anthropology (especially Wolfgang Iser's reception theory and Jan and Aleida Assmann's work on cultural memory). It is only natural that German ecocriticism should have been influenced by these currents of thought.

Timo Müller has recently (2011) argued that two of the principal models of German ecocritical theory today have their roots in literary anthropology.²³ In the 1980s, Wolfgang Iser developed a conception of the function of literary texts as lying in their potential to contrast everyday experiences with possible fictional alternatives, permitting readers to develop and modify their self-understanding in a process of imaginative boundary-crossing. Gernot and Hartmut Böhme subsequently thought through the ecological consequences of this approach. Their 'aesthetics of nature' is grounded in traditional liberal humanism, but inflects it by the idea of a special sensibility allowing human beings to reconnect to nature.

In order to establish new, non-hierarchical relations with nature, the Böhmes argue, we need to revisit premodern, symbiotic conceptions of the human being in its natural environment, such as Paracelsus's idea of a

²³ This is not to deny that other aspects of literary theory widely engaged with by German scholars (e.g. Marxism and psychoanalysis) possess an ecocritical dimension. However, there has been a notable absence of ecofeminist contributions, and while Heidegger remains a key point of reference for international ecocritics, his critique of technology is rarely cited as a model by German literary critics.

symbolic 'language of nature'. This may have been superseded in the natural sciences, but it has remained a productive force in the history of ideas, contributing to both literature (Novalis, Baudelaire and much twentieth-century nature poetry), and philosophy (Kant, Benjamin, Adorno, Blumenberg). Moreover, they claim that it is through our bodily feelings and reactions to the environment that we enter into communication with the objective world.²⁴ Traces of bodily experience are present in all language, but most palpable in poetic texts working with metaphors and images, hence literature's special role as a medium facilitating reconnection with nature. In an age of environmental destruction, the cultural archive of literary texts is a resource whose potential should not be overlooked in strategies of renaturalisation. Literature records and stores information about how societies position themselves within nature, giving voice to aspects of culture which are otherwise excluded and silenced, such as women, 'uncivilised' peoples, and the physical world. The survival of the human race depends on the re-institution of threatened sensibilities as a high priority. Hartmut Böhme links this role of literature, art and aesthetics in facilitating human survival with a conception of nature as a 'cultural project' (Böhme/ Matussek/ Müller 2000, 118-31). We must accept responsibility for shaping it, in the knowledge that our control over it is not unlimited. Works of art can both serve as aesthetic models of human interaction with nature, and imagine and represent utopian alternatives to contemporary patterns of behaviour.

The second significant contribution to ecocritical theory, Hubert Zapf's fusion of cultural ecology and textual criticism, regards literary texts as capable of revitalising the cultural system, by condensing and transforming elements of public discourse in nodal constructs such as symbols and metaphors. Whereas Böhme remains subject-centred in his attempt to overcome the problems associated with anthropocentrism, Zapf adopts a systemic approach, asking what function culture performs within society. He distinguishes between three equally important discursive functions of literature in his model of literature as a medium of cultural ecology: a culture-critical, an imaginative, and a reintegrative function (Zapf 2002, 33-9). First, literature

²⁴ Gernot Böhme's theory of 'atmospheres' (see Rigby 2011) is the principal form in which phenomenology is present in German ecocritical theory.

draws attention to oppressive structures of the cultural system. Secondly, it gives voice to what these structures suppress, and provides a testing-ground for alternative forms of cultural organization. And finally, it has a unique capacity to address the whole person, and cross boundaries between otherwise divided social systems and discourses. The cultural impact of literary texts derives above all from their symbolic and metaphorical condensation of information.

How then might the achievements and contribution of German ecocriticism to date be summed up? Perhaps by saying that it has drawn on and explicated a body of thought which shares much with American and British culture, but nevertheless differs in possibly instructive ways. Through theoretically-informed interdisciplinarity and intercultural comparisons, it has also added to the range of perspectives and methodologies in the toolkit of the international community of scholars. My starting point was the fact that literary criticism appears to have played a less prominent role in humanities debates on sustainability in Germany than in the US, and that this may be a reflection of the dominance of philosophical, ethical, historical, political and social discourses, and the relatively modest volume and status of German literary writing on the environment. Must eco-thinking necessarily be centred on literature? Perhaps there are special historical and cultural reasons why this is so in the United States, and it should be regarded as the exception rather than the rule.

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